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Entangled whale freed from fishing gear in NJ

By WAYNE PARRY

Associated Press Writer

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ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.

A humpback whale that became entangled in fishing gear off the New Jersey coast is free again.

A three-member rescue crew cut away fishing line and other gear Tuesday evening that had snagged the humpback whale, entangling it since Wednesday.

Rescuers say it suffered injuries to its back and tail, but managed to swim off on its own.

"It had curvature on its back from the weight of the gear pulling down on it, but the primary entanglement was the line wrapped around its tail, which caused a gash," said Teri Frady, a spokeswoman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The rescue team included one NOAA marine expert and two members of the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies in Massachusetts. They were able to draw near the whale and cut the fishing gear loose from it without incident, Frady said.

The 25- to 30-foot whale had been snagged about 8 miles off Sandy Hook near the approach to Ambrose Channel, the main shipping channel in and out of the Port of New York and New Jersey.

The whale had been near the surface and able to breathe on its own since it was spotted on Wednesday. The U.S. Coast Guard cutter Penobscot Bay enforced a 500-yard safety zone around the whale to keep boats away from it.

The whale was not yet fully grown; adult humpback whales typically reach 40 to 50 feet long, Frady said.

The site was not far from where a family of 16 bottlenose dolphins stayed in two rivers near the Sandy Hook Bay for half of last year, sparking a heated debate over whether they should be removed or left to leave on their own.

Three of the dolphins died, and employees of a nearby restaurant said they saw about five leave the Shrewsbury River and go out to Sandy Hook Bay just before the river froze last month. The fate of the remaining eight dolphins is not known, but a helicopter search earlier this month failed to spot any dolphins, alive or dead.

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